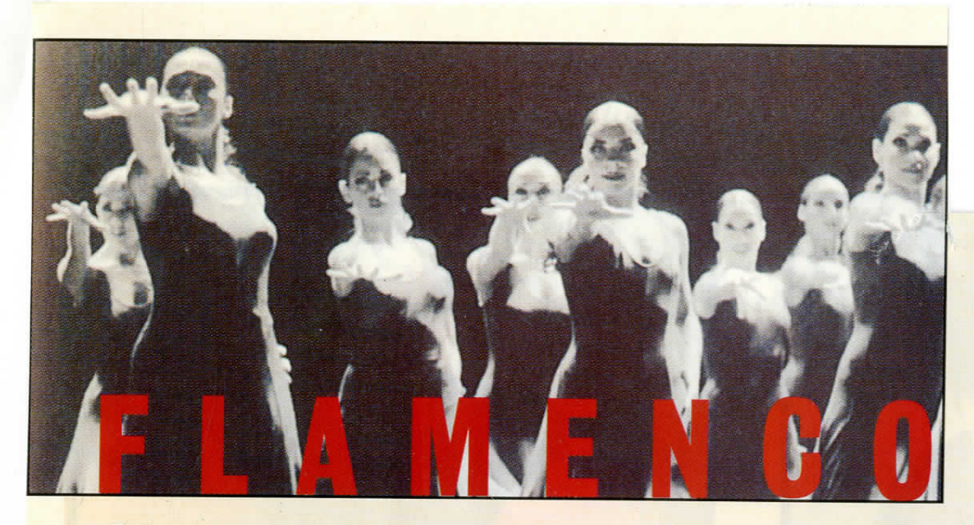


Obscure roots, new branches

They have sung to us all
In a night of drunken pleasure
Verses which have killed us . . .
— Manuel Machado

FLAMENCO, says historian and critic Angel Alvarez Caballero, "is a young art which seems old." Surprisingly, the earliest references do not go beyond 1760. "Its origins," Caballero continues, "remain enigmatic." That is probably because it is the art form par excellence of what we now call marginalised peoples. The Romany gypsies who arrived in Andalusia in the 15th century were its seminal force — and its womb a landless peasantry living in brutal poverty under *latifundista* landlordism.

The outlawed remnants of Spain's Arab and Jewish populations, dispossessed and hounded by the new Christian rulers, were still rich in culture. Caballero imagines all these groups, along with "beggars and delinquents, forming an underworld. Perhaps Flamenco was born in that zone of Andalusia because it was so characteristic a crossroads of diverse cultures . . . and disparate beliefs."

Caballero reminds us that "the most important things were drink, craic (Not surprisingly, there is no real English equivalent to *juerga*) and frequently sex." Female Flamenco artistes were "almost always required to work as 'hostesses'." Stabbings and murders in the cafés gave Flamenco a bad name. In this unlikely ambience great art was made.

Despite its anti-establishment origins, Franco attempted to co-opt Flamenco as a folkloric prop for a fascist regime and the tourist industry collaborated. Since democracy was restored in 1978, Flamenco has flourished, making a powerful mark on Spanish cinema, and giving Spanish pop music a badly needed indigenous voice.

Do such developments — exemplified by spectaculars like *Pasión Gitana* — risk tearing up Flamenco by its roots? Cristóbal Reyes, Joaquín Cortés's uncle and mentor, replies dustily: "All this talk about roots is very cliched. We *are* our roots, we take them with us on tour. There are those who believe that the only genuine Flamenco is played in a cave, on a guitar strung with the tripes of a pig. That root goes nowhere."

Garcia Lorca, in a famous essay, attempted to define the *Duende*, the spirit of Flamenco: "The *Duende* doesn't come if it sees no possibility of death, if it doesn't know it will haunt the house of death, if it doesn't mean to shake those branches which we all carry, and which neither are, nor will be, comforted."

This is not the stuff of mass box office. As Hollywood's children, we want consolation, not a naked confrontation with our own mortality. If Joaquín Cortés really wants to bring *Duende* to the masses, he will have his work cut out.

● *Quotes are from Angel Alvarez Caballero's essays accompanying Elke Stolzenberg's photographs in* ***Las Máscaras de lo jondo****, published by Ediciones del Prado.*

Paddy Woodworth
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